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On vegetable love: gardening, plants, and people in the north of England

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A dominant model in the West has metaphorically likened the human body to a machine since at least the time of the Enlightenment. Drawing on research in the north of England with gardeners, this article explores a different set of associations. I consider the implications of English gardening practices and knowledge that insist on reciprocal parallels between human bodies and intentionality and those of plants. While humans are not equated with plants, plants are incorporated into a worldview that is not straightforwardly mechanistic. I discuss the implications of describing these connections between plants and people as 'simply' metaphorical, arguing instead for a theoretical framing that seeks analytical space beyond metaphor.

> My vegetable love should grow
> Vaster than empires, and more slow;
> An hundred years should go to praise
> Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze.
>
> From 'To His Coy Mistress', Andrew Marvell, 1621-78

Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' is one of the most famous attempts at seduction ever written in the English language. The stanza above, however, employs a fairly odd turn of phrase in a poem intending to seduce: 'vegetable love'. Marvell's intriguing phrase could be explained away as a metaphorical conceit intending to jolt by an unexpected juxtaposition between plants and people.[1] This reaction is due to a worldview that insists on a separation between mind and body as well as society from nature. Indeed, Western naturalism 'supposes an ontological duality between nature, the domain of necessity, and culture, the domain of spontaneity', whereby 'social relations ... can only exist internal to human society' and not between the realms of humanity and nature (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 473). Within this ontological framework, language that unites people and plants is dismissible as only poetic licence and nothing more substantial.

I would like to explore a different approach to Marvell's evocative phrase 'vegetable love' and to demonstrate how it is of interest to anthropologists, particularly those working on subjectivity, knowledge, nature, and the body. I wish to use Marvell's turn of phrase as a way into a topic that initially appeared during fieldwork in 2000-1 and

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that I more systematically studied during a second period of fieldwork in 2003-4. Both periods of research were carried out in the north of England, the first in South Yorkshire, and the second split evenly between South Yorkshire and Cheshire, 45 miles to the west. Based on this research, I explore in this article English cultural imaginings of the relations between people and plants based in gardening practice, gardening knowledge, and in the English language. While it might be tempting to declare these relations as metaphorical and claim instead that gardeners are speaking only 'as if' plants were people, as everyone 'really knows' human beings and plants occupy radically different domains, I argue that this would be to gloss too easily over sets of meaning in everyday gardening practice that merit much closer attention.

In particular, I examine an assumed dichotomy in the medical anthropology literature on the body that has contrasted bodily experiences of 'Western' people with those of 'non-Western' people.[2] I propose that a closer examination is needed, and I focus on metaphors of the body as machine. These tend to be described in the literature as Western, and are then compared to holistic understandings of the body, often described as non-Western. My data from the north of England resist and complicate this description, making categorizations of difference between Western and non-Western bodily experiences more difficult to sustain. Inspired by research on embodiment in medical anthropology and by Ingold's work on perception and the environment (2000), I draw on both to examine ways of knowing the body in relationship to the natural world, and I examine the ways in which social relations are woven into gardening practice and knowledge. I then consider the implications of the relations between people and plants for metaphor, notions of the body, and anthropology.

'Body-as-machine' metaphors

In 'The mindful body', a seminal article in medical anthropology and on embodiment published in 1987, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock trace some of the ways in which the human body is put to work to 'domesticate' the places where humans live (1987: 20). They draw on examples from non-Western cultures to illustrate how bodies are used, such as Bastien's research with Qollahuaya Andean Indians in Bolivia, living at the foot of Mount Kaata. He writes that Qollahuayas 'understand their own bodies in terms of the mountain, and they consider the mountain in terms of their own anatomy' (Bastien 1985: 598, cited in Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987: 20). Scheper-Hughes and Lock assert that such examples illustrate 'symbolic uses of the human body in classifying and "humanizing" natural phenomena, human artifacts, animals and topography' (1987: 21) and that dozens of other ethnographic examples like this exist world-wide.

In marked contrast with examples of non-Western cosmologies of embodied worlds, in which the body is 'not understood as a vast and complex machine but rather as a microcosm of the universe' (Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987: 21), Scheper-Hughes and Lock juxtapose Western notions. They say that Western experience, characterized by 'the Cartesian legacy and the materialism and individualism of biomedical clinical practice' (1987: 22), has lost 'the sense of bodily integrity, of wholeness, of continuity and relatedness to the rest of the natural and social world' (1987: 22). Capitalist modes of production are also identified by the authors as a significant factor in rupturing the triad of body, mind, and society (1987: 22). They engage with E.P. Thompson's ideas (1967) about the transition from peasant societies to industrial capitalism in Britain and the shifts in temporal reckoning and work discipline that this promoted. Scheper-Hughes and Lock extend

Thompson's examples of task-orientation, declaring that Bourdieu's work among Algerian peasants shows a group of people who 'live in a social and natural world that has a decidedly human shape and feel to it' (1987: 22), as a way of demonstrating how non-Western people live in an embodied world. They argue that contemporary Western experience contrasts with this, existing in a world which is 'lacking a comfortable and familiar human shape', a world in which Western people experience bodily alienation, estrangement, and the 'pathological consequences' of these (1987: 22). Scheper-Hughes and Lock attribute one source of such bodily alienation to 'the symbolic equation of humans and machines, originating in our industrial modes and relations of production and in the commodity fetishism of modern life', whereby the human body itself is now a commodity (1987: 22).

It is these metaphors of body and machine that particularly interest me. Scheper-Hughes and Lock elaborate this point, writing that 'we rely on the body-as-machine metaphor each time we describe our somatic or psychological states in mechanistic terms, saying that we are "worn out" or "wound up", or when we say that we are "run down" and that our "batteries need recharging" ' (1987: 23). Continuing their comparison between non-Western, non-industrial and Western, industrial and postindustrial experiences, Scheper-Hughes and Lock write that 'while the cosmologies of nonindustrialized people speak to a constant exchange of metaphors from body to nature and back to body again, our metaphors speak of machine to body symbolic equations' (1987: 23). The emphasis here is thus on the 'body as machine' in the West, and how this image is in marked contrast to an embodied worldview in non-Western settings.

Metaphors comparing the human body to machines have long historical antecedents. In *Discourse on method*, Descartes compares the body to a clock, as it works without a mind; Hobbes, a contemporary of Descartes, uses inorganic metaphors of machines to explain the body in *Leviathan*; and in the late 1600s Giorgio Baglivi, Professor of Anatomy at Rome, made explicit parallels between body and machine (Synnott 1992: 93). While understandings such as these have enjoyed a long and dominant place in Western conceptions of the body, they have not met with universal agreement and alternate versions have competed for legitimacy (Synnott 1992: 80), such as amongst Romantic and transcendental poets and authors. However, despite this caveat, with the advent of full-blown industrial capitalist society in Britain, by the early twentieth century a mechanistic construction of the body neatly paralleled the mechanization of society (Synnott 1992: 98). At the heart of the matter is the symbolic equation of body with machine to explain bodily change and the human condition. If Cartesian philosophy is to be attributed with first articulating this worldview, then the processes of mass-industrialization made more palpable the metaphors of body and machine, and biomedicine in turn served as an important conduit for reifying such ideas, as highlighted by Scheper-Hughes and Lock.

Problematizing the assumptions of biomedicine has been extremely fruitful for medical anthropological theory, revealing much about the place of knowledge, body, and experience. Although two decades have passed, the thematic underpinnings of 'The mindful body' are just as relevant now as they were at the time of publication. Critically interrogating conceptions of the body and technology has taken on a renewed urgency with the advent of new knowledge and practices such as genetic engineering. But what of life transpiring outside of laboratories, research institutes, and clinical settings? What bodily concepts do people employ in their everyday lives outside of such sites? Are bodily metaphors in all Western cultural contexts overwhelmingly mechanical,

divorced from natural phenomena, and inhabiting a world without a 'human feel and shape to it' (Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987: 22)? What does this version of Western bodily experience possibly overlook? To explore these questions, I turn to my research with gardeners in the north of England, framed first by an examination of the literature on plants, people, and gardening.

Groundings

Plants and the uses people put them to have attracted much anthropological attention. Ethnobotany and ethnobiology have been concerned with how different cultural groups 'interpret, conceptualize, represent, cope with, utilize, and generally manage their knowledge of those domains of environmental experience which encompass living organisms, and whose scientific study we demarcate as botany, zoology, and ecology' (Ellen 2006: S2). Ethnobiology has engaged with wide-ranging topics such as how scientific classification of plants differs from lay classification of plants (e.g. Turner 1988) and how to craft a biocultural synthesis that challenges assumptions about the classification of the natural world as separate from culture (Ellen 2006; cf. Ingold 2000).

Anthropologists have written about parallels between human life-cycle festivals and festivals for the maturation and fertility of crops. This includes Bourque (1995) in Sucre, Ecuador, who considers how people use plant imagery to explain human growth and reproduction. Other anthropological research has explored planting idioms and botanic metaphors in connection to kinship, such as Fox (1971) on the relationship between mother's brother and sister's child amongst the Rotinese in Timor.

Some ethnographic examples emphasize the links between plants and people, especially children. Battaglia, writing about Sabarl gardeners in Melanesia, explains that in local understanding 'yams are "like people" ' and are described as 'the "children of the garden" ' who require parental care from the gardener (1990: 49, 94). Descola describes how Achuar women in the Upper Amazon have a maternal relationship with manioc plants in their gardens; this consanguine relationship, however, threatens the well-being of human offspring, as both sets of children are in a competitive contest with each other (1994: 201-5). Rosaldo recounts that for Illongot people in the Philippines, 'plants are used to speak of humans: the word for "young shoots" means "fetus" or "child", and "young leaves" describe the child's growing up' (1972: 91). Reciprocally, in curative spells, words that name human states ('toothless', 'dizzy', 'mad') are used to name plants in order to repel danger and restore health (Rosaldo 1972: 91). Kahn (1986) elaborates on the central role of taro in the northeast coast of Papua New Guinea for Wamiran people, describing extensive parallels between human beings and taro plants. These include qualities such as speech, hearing, sight, and smell attributed to taro plants, and taro sharing human substances such as blood, *anona* (soul), and gender (1986: 101-3).

Turning to trees, Bouquet (1996) traces European family tree imagery as involving ways in which knowledge about human genealogy is constituted. Rival's (1998) edited volume on cross-cultural tree symbolism provides further illustration of analogies between human beings and trees. This includes a series of equivalences between human bodies and the coconut tree in Bali (Giambelli 1998), and between the human body and ritually important trees amongst the Ankave in Papua New Guinea (Bonnemère 1998).

In addition to these accounts, a body of literature by anthropologists, geographers, historians, and sociologists has examined the specific activity of gardening in England, such as Morris's (1996) interpretation of the garden in twentieth-century children's books as a site for examining gendered and classed relations and Thomas's (1983)

extensive account of the explosion of English flower gardening between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Chevalier (1998) has studied the contemporary English garden as a site of domesticity from a material culture perspective, examining the ways in which gardens mediate sociability amongst neighbours, kin, and friends. Chevalier's analysis of gardens as 'spaces of circulation [of] plants, seeds, services, advice, knowledge ... , values, [and] people' (1998: 58) is mirrored in findings by Bhatti and Church (2001). Both are relevant to my own work, a point I return to later on.

Bhatti and Church look to gardens as sites for a better understanding of human-nature relations (Bhatti 1999; Bhatti & Church 2001). They argue that gardens are sites that permit 'opportunities and possibilities in relation to nature that may not exist elsewhere either in the rest of the home or in public spaces' (Bhatti & Church 2001: 380). Gardens permit engagement with the natural world, but also serve as a retreat from the public world; they are a site for creativity, social sharing, and remembering personal histories; and they serve as a source of status and as a mirror of identity (2001: 380).

There has been a particular focus on Englishness and English identity within the social-scientific literature on gardening, with gardens being termed 'key sites within the English cultural landscape' (Morris 1996: 59), an interest that also extends into texts not concerned with gardening *per se*. For example, in sections of Strathern's monograph *After nature* (1992), her insights on a particular love of gardening in England are put to work to interrogate notions of nature, individuality, continuity, and change. Similarly, Alan Macfarlane in *The culture of capitalism* uses observations on the love of nature and the 'ubiquity of flower gardens ... [and] dreams of retirement to a honeysuckle cottage' (1987: 77) as a way into exploring the growth of capitalism in Britain.

Gardening occupies a privileged place in the English cultural imagination. Gardening shows abound on television and radio, with long-running programmes including *Gardeners' World* on BBC 2 and *Gardeners' Question Time* on BBC Radio 4. There are also weekly gardening sections in all major newspapers, with English gardeners such as Alan Titchmarsh and Charlie Dimmock becoming celebrities in their own right. Non-celebrity gardening is also celebrated in the pages of local newspapers, with pictures of unusually shaped vegetables and their gardeners printed every harvest time. According to a survey in May 2005 by National Savings & Investments, British gardeners spend £4.2 billion on their gardens annually, and other sources estimate spendings of £5.15 billion on garden products in Britain for 2006 (MINTEL 2006).

It is this concentration of interest in, and practice of, gardening that attracts me to gardens as an ethnographic site. There is a ring of truth to Bhatti and Church's claim that 'gardens are not marginal spaces; they are commonplace and as such provide social scientists with a rich source of social interactions, encounters, meanings, and cultural exchanges' (2001: 380). A point to emphasize, however, is that gardening is by no means a homogeneous practice. It is carried out in multiple sites by many different practitioners – at home, as volunteers, and at work. Gardening is described by some as a life-long passion; for others it is a past-time or a retirement hobby. Gardening is also a source of employment, but a particularly arduous, physical, and low-paid one.

I conducted fieldwork in a variety of sites in the north of England, including formal flower and tree gardens, home gardens, and allotments. Allotments, a particularly British phenomenon, are areas of land set aside for growing food, which are subdivided into plots for individuals to rent from the local government. The allotment movement began in the late 1800s primarily as a means to supplement the diet of working-class families in urban areas. Garden space was (and is) notoriously lacking in

the housing from that era and allotments provided much-needed room to grow enough food for a family. After decades of enthusiastic use they declined in popularity, but are now experiencing a renaissance, albeit with new class and gender dynamics.

I worked with a variety of gardeners: professional, hobbyist, volunteers, formally trained, and self-taught. These categories often overlapped, with professional and volunteer gardeners also having their own personal gardens at home. Despite these differences, many points of convergence emerged in gardening practice and meaning amongst the people I worked with. It has been asserted by Scheper-Hughes and Lock that Western bodily experience occurs in a world reliant on 'machine to body symbolic equations' (1987: 23). Drawing on my ethnographic material with gardeners, I now assess the constancy of this claim.

Gardening practice, technique, and knowledge

Conducting research in two locales, South Yorkshire and Cheshire, meant that I was working in two areas with profoundly different contours historically, economically, and in terms of class. Important differences linked to these socio-economic factors emerged between these two sites (see Degnen 2006), but in regards to my focus here, there were no discernible differences between the two locales. Indeed, more striking is the extent to which these differences did not seem to have an impact on the ethnographic material I present in this article. In the following sections, I turn my attention to gardening practice, gardening technique, and gardening knowledge in the north of England.

Weeding and feeding

Whether for pleasure or as paid work, gardening places people in direct contact with the natural world. Responses to the changing seasons, weather conditions, local soil characteristics, processes of germination, and troublesome pests combine to create a body of knowledge with which gardeners engage with the plants in their gardens. Knowledge and technique were thus two assets in the garden, but as a novice I lacked both. Even weeding, a seemingly straightforward task, was at times complicated by my ignorance of what counted as a desired plant and what did not, and how to segregate the two efficiently.

For instance, Anthea[3] and I, both working as volunteers at a historical garden in Cheshire, were asked one day by Pamela, the head gardener, who is in her mid-forties, to weed part of a border bed. Anthea is a retired nurse in her late fifties and has been a gardener since the age of 9. She suggested that I begin by removing two sorts of weeds, mare's tail and couch grass, from the border. I set to work, trying to weed as normal from the surface of the soil, but was not successful so I asked for help. Anthea showed me how to chop and lift clumps of plants, exposing the weeds' roots. As they were no longer attached to the soil, they became much easier to pull out from the flower plants they were mingled with. Anthea showed me how to identify the weeds by their characteristics: bind weed roots make a 'snap' sound when bent and are juicy; couch grass roots are very white and angular. Once I had weeded the clump to her satisfaction, she showed me how to flip the whole mass of plants and earth over, like turning a carpet edge back onto the floor. This meant the last remaining grass roots could be pulled out so that, in her words, 'they don't undo all the hard work you've just done'.

Learning how to identify weeds and techniques for removing them was important, but so too was learning how to help certain plants grow. Steve, a volunteer at the same

garden as Anthea, spent an afternoon with me weeding a huge bed of leeks. Down on our hands and knees, we worked through the bed in synch, chatting as we went. Steve, who is in his mid-sixties and a retired insurance salesman with an allotment and garden at home, was trying to explain to me about fertilizer, how best to use it for plants, and that the biggest mistake by novice gardeners is to use fertilizer on plants when they are too young. He ended up explaining by saying that 'plants are like babies ... after germination or fertilization, they don't need feeding. Then, when they are born, they don't need much and can't eat rich adult food. But when they get bigger they *do* need it'. Steve elaborated the point that plants, like human babies, 'can't take much when they are starting out', and that fertilizing them or feeding them at this point is liable to kill them rather than nurture them, rather like human babies who need to eat baby food when they are young and cannot eat adult food until they are older.

Other plants require techniques to prevent them from growing. Ted, who is now in his late fifties and retired from the police force, is a volunteer with Steve as well as being an allotment-holder and a professional part-time gardener. He told us during a tea break how he had a new section of ground at his allotment which he needed to clear of weeds. He sprayed it with weedkiller, dug his compost heap into it, spread polythene across it, and then planted through holes in the plastic sheeting. He said that mare's tail are the only weeds that, despite these measures, still 'find their way and climb through' the holes. While weeding buttercups out of a flower bed, Lucy, another volunteer at the same garden, who is in her early sixties and a keen hobbyist gardener, called my attention to one buttercup that she had found 'sneaking' over an edging stone a foot away. She told me that 'this one will be running up into the bed from here ... they're clever!', much like the mare's tail that finds its way through despite Ted's best efforts at eradication.

In October, Steve and I raked up leaves along the entrance to the garden. We then deposited the leaves in a reserved part of the garden where they are left to rot and then can be used to prepare the ground to help plants grow. Steve went on and on about this as we raked, saying how 'this leaf mould is as good as manure once it's rotten down'. I asked what he meant. He said that leaf mould 'has good qualities in it' for the plants; that 'the roots take goodness out of soil and you need to put it back in, you need to replenish the ground', in the 'same way that we take vitamins for our health'. Steve continued, telling me that leaf mould also makes soil more acidic. Some plants, but not all plants, really love this, he said. Pamela, the head gardener, tasked me later in the same week with transplanting five rose bush cuttings and then making a mix of five parts compost to one part fertilizer 'to feed them'. Pamela then told me that I 'could use lime [for fertilizer] but I don't know if roses *like* lime'.

What plants like and what they need were often topics of discussion in the gardens. For example, Steve and Ted had a heated discussion about using a kind of fertilizer called 'fish, blood, and bone' for the rhubarb bed. Steve wanted to put it on the new bed that they had just made the previous week but Ted declined, saying that this sort of fertilizer should be used only for established plants, not newly planted ones, as 'they are lazy and you've got to make them work for it, make them *look* for the food'.

Reaping and sowing

Some plants required certain techniques for harvesting. One mid-summer's afternoon, I was helping Harold out on his allotment in the South Yorkshire village near the town of Barnsley where we both lived. He, in his mid-sixties, a retired miner, set me on

harvesting some beetroot while he fed his chickens in their pens. He showed me how to lift the beetroot with a garden fork, and then how to twist the green leaf tops off the beetroot. I was not, he emphasized, to *cut* the greens off. This is because beetroot, he told me, bleed if you cut their green tops with a knife or scissors. They do not bleed, however, if the tops are twisted off instead.

Harvesting techniques vary, but so do planting techniques, as not all plants are planted in the same way. Some can be sown directly into the ground; others need to be sown in pots, 'brought on' and 'hardened off' before they can be planted into the garden. Distances and depths between seeds are also highly variable depending on the plant in question. Gordon, for instance, who is a retired salesman in his early sixties and Lucy's husband, was talking me through how to plant potatoes. He recommended to me which direction each seed potato should be planted in, given the location of the eye, or plant-bud, that had sprouted. He also wanted to be sure that I was planting them eye side up as otherwise I would be, in his phrase, 'smothering them'. Similarly, it is not always self-evident where in the garden certain plants should be planted. As Anthea explained to me: 'I think gardening is all about experimenting'; when I asked her what she meant, she said that 'you have to keep trying new things ... plants aren't always happy in one spot so you might have to move them around until they get their feet somewhere different that they'll like better, even if the soil is the same'.

Order and care

Weeding, harvesting, and techniques for planting are part of the search for order that gardeners seek to impose onto their gardens and their plants. Trish, an allotment-holder in South Yorkshire who is in her early forties and a housewife, told me in June as we were erecting another A-frame over her newly planted beans that this was her favourite part of gardening. She enjoys seeing the 'structure and the order' emerging in early summer out of the allotment as plants begin to grow. Steve, back at the historical garden, whilst weeding the leek bed, exerted himself and exhorted me to make the two rows of leeks as tidy as possible because, as he put it, 'doesn't it make the bed *look* nice ... doesn't it look beautiful to see it nice and tidy behind you when you've been weeding'. This emotive feeling expressed by Steve recalls that of Trish: a sense of satisfaction and of aesthetic pleasure in forging order over disorder, carving order out of chaos, and taking pleasure in the new aesthetic that one's labour inscribes on the look of the garden.

Gardeners also spoke of inscribing order on gardens in terms of making gardens 'look cared for'. Lucy recounted to me several times how she likes a straight line, a sharp division between lawn and flower bed, as 'how else would you know where what started and what ended?' She had been busy that day working on one particular border and was pleased with what she had accomplished, saying that 'now it looks as though someone cares for it', much like a parent concerned with her child's appearance. Similarly, when I asked him why he had turned the soil over around the rhubarb, Tony, a volunteer in his early eighties who after retiring from the police force had worked as a forest warden, said that it made the rhubarb 'look cared for' and tidy.

While the search for order is generally agreed upon, how best to achieve it is not always a point of agreement for gardeners. When I was sitting in the gardener's shed with Pamela and Tony, Pamela started talking to us about the rhododendron that faced the hut and how it had a beautiful purple flower when in bloom. She told Tony that she would let him loose on it once it had flowered that year, and that he could then prune

it to his heart's content. This has been an ongoing battle between the two of them over every shrub, hedge, and larger plant in the garden. Tony loves to cut back severely; Pamela resists it. Pamela then commented to me, off-handedly, that the rhododendron bush actually was 'quite well behaved' and had not really 'gone berserk' growing all over the place, so there would not be much for Tony to prune anyway. Her comments mirrored those of Esther, a professional gardener in her thirties at a formal tree and flower garden in South Yorkshire. She likes plants being 'just a little on the unkempt side', unlike her co-workers Paul and Kev, also in their thirties, who like things in the garden to be extremely neat.

Gardeners also describe their plants as sometimes susceptible to the vagaries of weather: in November, Lucy told me that the poppy outside her back door at home had a bud on it and 'I was talking to it and was saying "you are getting *confused*, don't bloom yet!" ', as poppies normally bloom in late spring. Other gardeners describe how the susceptibility of plants can be an advantage and intentionally manipulated: Paul, Esther's co-worker, explained to me about 'retarding flowers' and how you have to pick the buds off sometimes in order to get the timing of their flowering right for special displays. The technique works, he said, because 'the plant's thinking "oh shit, I haven't done my job yet!" and so keeps trying to flower'. Similarly, Pamela described how some seeds need to experience the cold of winter in order to germinate and that you can put seeds in the fridge to 'trick them into thinking that it is time to grow', a technique used by competitive growers entering flower shows.

Plants that belong

Some plants, like weeds, are categorized as undesirable where they are growing and as a nuisance, but ultimately an expected nuisance. Other plants, however, are conceptualized as fundamentally not belonging in Britain. For instance, Gordon recounted to me how hawthorn, growing in the hedge surrounding the garden, 'is a *good* tree'. I asked him what he meant by this and he replied that hawthorn is good because it grows thickly, provides a highway for wildlife to shelter in and eat from, and that it is a native species. Sycamore, he continued, is an example of a 'bad tree because it is not native' to Britain. Similarly, Harold expressed initial disgust at the idea of using bean seeds from abroad. In late spring, he told me his 14-year-old grandson was trying to grow beans from seed brought back from Spain. This was pure folly in Harold's opinion, calling both Spanish seeds and the idea of growing them in Britain 'rubbish', insinuating an incompatibility of non-British seeds in British soil.

Earlier, I identified a particular passion for gardening and its links to Englishness and Britishness. This link can come to have negative implications when taken to extremes. In addition to sycamore and Spanish beans, examples include the expression of a connection between land and nation, whereby 'plants, especially those which are native, as opposed to those which are alien, are seen as the "rightful" inhabitants of British landscapes' (Agyeman & Spooner 1996: 207). A recent outcry against Spanish bluebells is a case in point, with the species being described as 'a foreign invader' placing 'modest' English native bluebells under 'threat' from 'genetic contamination', with worries expressed about crossbreeding between invader and native (*Guardian*, 3 May 2006). Or, in the words of Robert, a gardener in his late fifties whom I interviewed:

> [With Spanish bluebells] you are messing about with the equation, aren't you. It's sort of like there was a race somewhere in the world which automatically produced ten children per couple and then

> we found that they were immigrating into this little island ... we'd be very concerned about that because the, um, natural species on the island would be outnumbered and eventually replaced at quite a rate ... You almost need an island out in the middle of the Atlantic but even then seeds float and turn up in odd places, don't they?

How, then, to protect the 'modesty' of the native species from the 'invasive' clutches of the foreigner? The BBC's *Gardeners' World* advised no intercourse with the invaders, telling gardeners not to grow 'the non-native types', which elsewhere were described as 'aliens', 'lurking in many gardens ... [and] capable of terrible destruction'; 'vigorous growers' that 'have come from abroad'; 'if they escape into the countryside, they can run amok ... vandalizing some of our finest landscapes' (*Guardian*, 12 February 2005). The symbolic weight that bluebells hold in the national imaginary should not be overlooked here: they are perceived as a quintessential symbol of the British and English springtime. Language used to describe Spanish bluebells thus plays on this national importance of the bluebell by evoking troubling themes of racial purity, knee-jerk nationalism, and anti-immigration by demarcating which plants are welcome (the natives) and which are not (the invading immigrants) in discourse that could just as easily be used by the far right about human beings.

Reciprocal parallels

Over time, I realized that the gardeners I worked with assume a reciprocity of identification between people and plants. Plants, like people, are perceived as exhibiting intentionality and sentience. Plants have likes and dislikes; plants find their way and climb through obstructions such as rocks, fences, and plastic sheeting used to try to contain them. They are able to do this because they are clever and they can undo the hard work of the gardener. Plants have culinary needs, they eat food, and they express food preferences. Plants are like human babies in their dietary needs. Plant's lives, conditions, and quality are paralleled to human life and human health. Plants need to breathe and can be smothered. Some plants have manners, and others are hooligans. Plants and gardens look best when care is lavished on them. Some plants have a developed subjectivity attributed to them and can go berserk and run amok, be confused or tricked, and even panic and think 'oh shit', whilst others are lazy and need motivating. Plants need vitamins like humans, and, like humans, some plants will bleed if cut. Some plants, like hawthorn, are particularly desirable because they are natives but others are immigrants threatening national purity, such as Spanish bluebells.

Notions of reciprocal implication between people and plants in Europe have a long history, and help contextualize some of this material. For example, the Swiss alchemist and physician Paracelsus (1493-1541) is widely attributed with being a key figure in the development of modern medical science and chemistry. The Doctrine of Signatures, a concept associated with Paracelsus, posited that disease could be cured by finding correlations between the diseased organs, planets governing the organ, and the plant species that could cure the disease (Richardson-Boedler 1999). The Doctrine of Signatures was in turn elaborated on by many others, including Nicolas Culpeper (1616-54), an English physician and herbalist author of *Culpeper's English physician and complete herbal*, still in print today (Abraham 1990: 19). Culpeper's text translated from Latin into English a pharmacopeia of plants. In it, plants are attributed healing properties for the human aliments that they resemble, such as lesser celandine (also called 'pile wort'),

attributed with curative properties for piles, whose shape and appearance the root of the plant resembles. While the Doctrine of Signatures eventually fell out of favour, it was for many hundreds of years a dominant system. It was Pamela who first told me about the Doctrine when teaching me how to identify celandine by its roots. Although she does not subscribe to the Doctrine, she knew of it, was intrigued by it, and used it to teach me how to identify a particular plant. The Doctrine, with its insistence on consubstantiality between people and plants, cannot account by itself for contemporary gardening practices. It does, however, point to a significant depth of history and of meaning that may foreshadow and frame contemporary understandings with once important, if now defunct, antecedents.

Long-standing cultural understandings of the parallels between human beings and plants are also evidenced in the English language: people reap what they sow; they have family trees and genealogical roots; young people bud, blossom, and flower into adults; one bad apple spoils the bunch; 'clone' comes from the Greek work for 'twig'; organs are harvested for transplant; 'old stick', 'flower', and 'petal' are expressions of affection; children attend kindergarten (child garden) and nurseries; and people can be as alike as two peas in a pod. Such language is also reciprocal in the other direction as plants think, choose, want, are lazy, are thirsty and hungry, drink and eat, sleep, have toes, can be leggy, and look tired; some have eyes, pass on traits, and are in beds. Emerging from ethnographic fieldwork with gardeners is thus one prominent theme: the mutually implicating parallels between plants and people both in the English language and in gardening practice and knowledge.

Gardens are autobiographical

The second theme I wish to elaborate on is how plants and gardens are also autobiographical. I draw here on a lengthy narrative excerpt from an interview with Lucy, whom I worked with as a volunteer in one of the gardens for almost a year and who is also a keen gardener at home. It is worth quoting at length for the numerous crucial points it raises that figure in my argument, and for its representativeness of how many people spoke to me about their gardens and their plants during fieldwork.

Lucy moved to Cheshire from Scotland twenty years ago when her husband changed jobs. Before marriage and before having children, she worked in a main branch of the Royal Bank of Scotland in Edinburgh in the 1960s. Here she is talking about a particular rose bush in her garden during an interview I conducted with her:

> *Lucy*: ... it's a rose that, well, you see, before we were married, one of my friends through the Bank, I would see her every Thursday. One week she'd come to me for the evening and supper and the next one I would go to hers. Her mother had this garden which had a hedge with roses and I used to love these roses. They were pink buds and they came out with white on the petals. In the summer I would always come home with a bunch of roses that she would pick for me. And when Gordon and I got married, she gave me a cutting of her rose bush and I've carried that cutting through all of our houses.
> *C*: Have you got other plants that were given to you by friends?
> *Lucy*: Yes, oh yes. The rhubarb we grow we got from our friends in Lindsay twenty years ago; yes, I've got lots of little things that mean something to me because they're from friends. The two little conifers down there [at the bottom of the garden] I got from a friend who lived just round the corner; he's died now. Another chap, Archie, he gave me the ottoman anemones and they still come out. The broom at the front came from when I was walking in my friend's garden at John of Groats. I had taken her a Corsican lily from our garden and she said 'it won't grow' 'cause they are so far north there. I said 'well it doesn't matter, it's worth a try'. The year after she came on the phone and she says 'what was that plant you brought me?' and it was the Corsican lily. It was blooming and she was so delighted. Anyway,

> we were walking round her garden on an evening and she said 'I wish I could give you a cutting out of my garden'. And she took a pod off the broom and she said 'there you are, try and grow some of these'. And I took them home and planted them and they've come out. And in two months or so I would expect them to be in bloom again ... and of course, that was Moira. She was my best friend for so many years, but she's died two years ago now.

This sort of gardening talk is not an isolated case. During my first period of fieldwork in the Barnsley area, I moved from a rented flat into the first house I had ever owned. Margaret, a woman in her eighties whom I had come to know through my research, told me that I must come for some cuttings from her garden for my new home. She and I spent a morning going round her well-tended beds, digging up sections of established plants, and wrapping them in damp newspaper for me to bring to my tiny garden. As we went along, she recounted spontaneously for me where and from whom many of the plants originated: this one from a favourite neighbour where she lived thirty years ago; this a carnation she had successfully rooted from a birthday bouquet from her granddaughter three years ago; a purple geranium from her mother's garden that had travelled with her every time she moved, transplanting cuttings into her new garden. On an entirely different occasion, another friend in the village called Mary told me that the peonies I was admiring in her front garden came originally from her grandmother; Mary had taken the peonies with her each time she and her husband had moved. She is now in her eighties and has had the peonies since she was in her late twenties.

Likewise, Lucy traces her treasured rose bush back to her early adulthood, to a good friend, and to memorable and formative times spent together. Lucy also recounts how the rose was a wedding gift. As such, the rose bush came to mark not just a friendship and a relationship which was 'like' family, but also a forging *of* family through her marriage to Gordon. The rose, then, also comes with the married couple, as a member of the family itself, moving with them to their new homes, and travelling with them through their lives.[4]

Gardens and plants are autobiographical, with individual plants often having social genealogies in the life of the gardener as gardeners gift cuttings of plants to each other. These histories and connections are remembered and recounted, as the examples from Lucy, Margaret, and Mary demonstrate. Connections are also imagined into the future, such as during my last weeks of fieldwork, where fellow gardeners said that when I knew where I would be living after the end of my research I must let them know so that we could fill my new garden with cuttings from their own. That way, they said, every time I looked at my garden, I would be reminded of them. Furthermore, on numerous occasions gardeners urged me to make return visits after the end of fieldwork so that I would see the fruits of my labour in high summer. They worried out loud that I would not be able to spare the time to maintain the connections with plants I had worked with, a connection they felt needed to be recognized through visitation.

I propose not only that these are highly significant kinds of relationships being expressed through plants, and through time, but also that relationships between people and plants are being expressed. As with the cross-cultural metaphors described earlier, there are clear reciprocal parallels being drawn between human bodies and plants, and also between the intentionality of human action and decisions and the animate life of plants. Humans are not *equated* with plants, but plants are incorporated into a worldview that is not straightforwardly or only mechanistic.

While I do not contest the presence and weight of metaphors of body as machine in Western cultural settings, emerging from this research with gardeners is an intriguing

set of ideas about plants and about people that calls into question the singularity of this model. This is because gardening practice and knowledge, and the English language, also draw on organic, non-mechanized, mutually implicating connections between people and plants. My account helps broaden understandings of the cultural resources used to describe and experience the body in Western settings, such as the north of England, but in ways that jar received notions of Western bodily experience as based on parallels only with machines.

Vegetable love

I return now to the issue of metaphor. On the one hand, as with Marvell's turn of phrase 'vegetable love', it would be very easy to explain away the links between people and plants in gardening practice and in the English language that I have described as simply a matter of metaphor. Observers might claim that gardeners are speaking only 'as if' plants were people but that everyone 'really knows' that human beings and plants occupy radically different domains, corresponding to the orthodoxy of Western naturalist ontology. In some respects this makes perfect sense, particularly in terms of growth and reproduction, things that both plants and people do. Indeed, since Lakoff and Johnson (2003 [1980]) have amply demonstrated how human cognition, understanding, and experience are largely structured by metaphorical concepts which partly depend on physical surroundings, perhaps it would be more surprising if people did *not* make metaphorical associations between themselves and plants as both categories of being grow and reproduce.

The first proposal that I would make in response is that my ethnographic data demonstrate how the realms of intersection between people and plants *exceed* reproduction, growth, and sexuality. In the examples that I describe above, the intersections encompass intentionality and they include bodily characteristics like bleeding, sleeping, and breathing. They extend beyond physiology to include subjective states such as cleverness and insanity; and they include nationalism, segregation, and fears over immigration. Perhaps most important of all, they encompass a writing of social relations, memory, experience, and personal history onto individual plants and gardens. Consequently, the relationships being evoked between humans and plants also surpass a simple 'human-other' divide of Western naturalist ontology. This, however, becomes silenced if we deem these as 'only' metaphorical and not substantive.

A parallel body of anthropological research has looked at the conceptual relations between humans and animals rather than people and plants. For example, Scott has demonstrated how Cree hunters in the north of Canada 'make ample use of humans and animals as interpretants of one another. The family structure, leadership, memory and communication processes of geese are explored as analogues of the corresponding human qualities, both individual and social' (1989: 198). Scott says that this could be described as humans anthropomorphizing animals, but to do so would be 'to assume the primacy of the human term' whereas instead in Cree cosmology 'the animal term reacts with perhaps equal force on the human term, so that animal behaviour can become a model for human relations' (1989: 198). While this is admittedly a very different cultural context than the north of England, and the links between animals and humans are perhaps less surprising than the links between plants and humans, the reciprocal mutuality that Scott evokes is pertinent to my description of people and plants. This is because of the point he makes about how humans and animals serve as *interpretants* of one another, a process that my research demonstrates also occurs in

English gardens with plants and people. Furthermore, this reciprocity is more than plants serving as just a metaphorical realm for humans, but rather presents a dialogical model of reciprocal identifications between people and plants that exceeds metaphor.

Secondly, these connections between people and plants resonate in significant cultural ways with implications for anthropological theory. For example, although medical anthropologists have emphasized rupture in Western experience between the subjective self and the rest of the natural world, and emphasized the ascendancy of biomedicine as an important conduit for reifying ideas about body as machine, they have not always tested the waters of how such notions play out in everyday practices and beliefs outside of biomedical institutions in contexts such as gardening. This would perhaps be fair enough if ideas about bodies and about health stayed tidily within these frames of negotiation, but since 'medical anthropology [is] a powerful tool for reassessing what is taken as natural and normal in connection with the human body' (Lindenbaum & Lock 1993: xi), and as medical anthropology is also about studying 'the creation, representation, legitimization, and application of knowledge about the body in both health and illness' and about other supposedly 'natural categories' (1993: x), then other ways of interpreting the culturally shaped, reciprocal referencing between plants and human bodies in language and practice beyond metaphor are at the very least interesting to consider and to think through.

One of the questions arising from this perspective is not *why* a mechanistic model of self and body came to dominate all other ways of thinking about them in Western cultural settings, but instead why we *think* it has when evidence to the contrary is all around us: in the English language; in gardening knowledge and practice; and when a writing of social relations, memory, experience, and personal history onto individual plants and gardens is not eccentric behaviour but a widespread pattern. Dismissing these as simply metaphorical is to gloss too easily over how gardeners in the north of England conceptualize and interpret the world within which they live.

A third point I wish to make is that insisting on the idea of plants as 'just' plants and of these linkages between people and plants as 'only' metaphorical is to stay within the comfortable bounds of what Ingold describes as 'a master narrative about how human beings, through their mental and bodily labour, have progressively raised themselves above the purely natural level of existence to which all other animals are confined' (2000: 78). Ingold also points out how this metanarrative 'of the human transcendence of nature' leads to a vision of 'the domestication of plants and animals figur[ing] as the counterpart of the self-domestication of humanity in the process of civilisation' (2000: 77). That is to say, within a broadly Western worldview, plants are supposed to be of a realm that is not human, and which cannot be human. Not only are plants non-sentient organisms that exist in the natural world and which are a resource available for human use, subject to human intentionality via cultivation and breeding, but it is human intervention in plants via domestication that has itself marked a monumental moment in the history of human civilization.

Ingold has systematically argued against the limitations of this worldview. He develops an argument for a perspective on 'knowing the world' that is not restricted by a Western dualistic model that separates society from nature. Recent work by Ingold and others such as Willerslev (2007) has focused on how animism is not simply metaphorical (hunters not acting 'as if' animals are non-human persons) but rather, it is suggested, is about humanizing the world, and indeed this work calls into question commonsense notions of what it means to be human itself. Ingold turns to

the rich ethnographic examples of non-Western hunter-gatherers and pastoralists to build his argument, but tends not to use material from Western societies. My entry-point into the same dilemma has been from another node on the ethnographic spectrum. My material with gardeners in the north of England helps expand Ingold's 'dwelling perspective' by using material from a Western setting which in turn helps evidence the artifice of some of the boundaries between the categories 'Western' and 'non-Western'.

Throughout, I have sought to demonstrate how gardening practice and knowledge amongst gardeners in the north of England complicate several sets of anthropological understandings: of Western notions of body as mechanized in direct opposition with non-Western notions of body as part of the natural cosmos; of the ascendancy of Western naturalist ontology when instead it appears that this is more uneven and less uniform than commonly assumed; and how connections between people and plants are not necessarily metaphorical but are instead reciprocal and social, embedded in a long history of significance. I do not wish to promote a complete inversion of dogma of body and machine metaphors, but instead advocate the need to explore everyday forms of knowledge in sites such as gardens in the north of England for what they reveal about coexisting alternatives.

NOTES

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[1] Marvell, a metaphysical poet, was one of a loose grouping of seventeenth-century English poets including John Donne and Abraham Cowley; this group is known for employing arresting images and startling comparisons, such as Donne comparing his soul and that of his wife to a pair of compasses (Beer 1972: 1, 22-5). The unlikely phrase 'vegetable love' could be explained as an example of this sort of playful comparison, but poetry critics have debated its meaning. Some propose it is a metaphor expressing the organic nature of love (Margoliouth 1971: 253). Others suggest that Marvell employs the phrase in a ribald fashion to evoke the corporeal, embodied, and uncontrollable growth of passion the male narrator is experiencing (Smith 2003: 81). Still others argue that 'vegetable' alludes to the Aristotelian doctrine of three souls: rational, animal, and vegetative, with vegetable soul the lowest of the three (Bradbrook & Thomas 1961: 43) and that such a juxtaposition would be intentionally improper and 'expertly comic' on Marvell's part (Rajan 1978: 170-1).

[2] For the sake of readability, I will not continue to put the terms Western and non-Western into quotation marks. However, they are terms and categories that I treat with extreme caution since both have become shorthand for a great deal of assumed meaning and assumed internal similarity. While this is at times convenient and necessary, at other times it obfuscates significant differences in meaning and practice within and between the two categories. As I am responding in this article to an established set of arguments that already employ the two categories, I am obliged also to refer to them, but wish to signal here my discomfort with them and the misrepresentative homogeneity they often imply.

[3] All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

[4] Wagner (2002), working in South Carolina, USA, with gardeners, has found similar tendencies: 83 per cent of her research population attached special meanings to plants in their gardens; in 64 per cent of these cases, plants were special because they commemorated someone important to the gardener; in other cases, plants were special because of particular properties (size, longevity, etc.) or because they evoked a special time or place from the past. Memory, the past, and social relations were thus evoked by gardeners in Wagner's study, as they are by the gardeners I worked with in the north of England.

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De l'amour végétal : jardinage, plantes et humains dans le Nord de l'Angleterre

Résumé

La comparaison du corps humain à une machine est une métaphore dominante dans la pensée occidentale depuis le Siècle des Lumières au moins. À partir de recherches menées dans le Nord de l'Angleterre auprès de jardiniers, l'auteure explore un autre ensemble d'associations. Elle examine les implications des pratiques et connaissances du jardinage en Angleterre qui mettent l'accent sur des parallèles réciproques entre le corps et l'intentionnalité des humains et ceux des plantes. Bien que les humains ne soient pas assimilés aux végétaux, les plantes sont intégrées dans une vision du monde qui n'est pas rigoureusement mécaniste. L'auteure examine les implications qu'aurait une approche « simplement » métaphorique de ces liens entre plantes et personnes et avance qu'il faut, pour les décrire, un cadre théorique dont l'espace analytique irait au-delà de la métaphore.

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